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ABSTRACT

Preparing students to be both constructors and consumers of visual information will be an important responsibility for all teachers. This will mean giving learners the tools to go beyond what is merely visual to the deeper, human meanings that lie beneath. One important way that educators can prepare students to be wise visual consumers is to help them define their own frames of reference. A simple activity that can have meaning for students of any age is where participants first look straight ahead and describe what they see and then change positions; with each new shift of position comes a new view of their world. The lesson of this activity is that flexibility increases visibility. Students who understand can examine how the meanings of common symbols change based upon individual perspective. Teachers can construct observational activities to help students discover if all of them are "seeing" the same thing; however teachers choose to use this activity, it will be important that participants share their results with each other, since this will reinforce the connection between perspective and attitude. Another way for students to discover how powerful visual symbols are is to construct some for themselves. One activity is to have students draw a symbol of themselves. The challenge for educators is to help students learn to recognize what they have to gain by learning to discover meanings behind visuals from more perspectives than their own. (AEF)

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Old Dad And Edna St. Vincent Millay: Tools For Humanizing the Visual

by Elizabeth (Betty) Cramton and Beverlee R. Kissick

Abstract

Preparing students to be both constructors and consumers of visual information will be an important responsibility for all teachers. This will mean giving them the tools to go beyond what is merely visual to the deeper, human meanings that lie beneath. This paper suggests ways that educators, kindergarten to college, can help students define their own frames of reference, learn how their interpretation of visual symbols compares to the ways that others interpret the same symbols, and construct visual symbols for themselves.

Introduction

Nineteenth century English artist and social critic John Ruskin once wrote: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something. Hundreds of people can talk for one who thinks, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one"(cited in Stevenson, 1984, p. 2095).

Labeling the ability to see clearly (visual literacy) as poetry, prophecy, and religion may seem a bit extreme to the modern educator, maybe even a bit frightening, but the responsibility for helping students recognize and correctly interpret visual information is not extreme. By deliberately building into the curriculum experiences which enrich the student's exposure to the meanings behind the visual, educators may find that the task need not be frightening, either. And, thankfully there are ways for teachers to help students find meaning behind the bombardment of visual cues they confront every day-- to see beyond the merely visual, to become visually literate.

Looking Toward the Future

A century or a little more has passed since Ruskin described the value of seeing clearly, a century that took us from a time relatively free from manufactured visual cues through the invention and use of ever-increasing kinds of technology to produce and reproduce images. Students in his time would have defined "art work" as sketching, painting, or sculpting and would have learned about it in classrooms equipped with paper and chalk. Today's students have the technology to learn that there is more to the visual than "art work" and that they can create it themselves using all that Ruskin's era had plus the full power of the mediated classroom.

As teachers prepare students for a century when they will be both consumers and composers of visual objects, it is more important than ever that they recognize the paradox access to technology has created. Just as it is their job to help students learn to make full use of the power of technology, so it is their job to help them recognize that, although technology gives us chances that no generation before us had, it is still just a tool whose chief value is the opportunity it gives us to interact with other people. Contemporary Colombian philosopher William Ospina warns that the "detour of humanity into a world of objects without sense results in the confusion of all values and a lack of purpose" (cited in Wilson, 1996, p. 39).

Educators will need to find ways to convince students (kindergarten through college) that, while technology can manufacture, supply, and transmit the visual, it doesn't become literacy until it becomes human. This will mean that students will need to look beyond the surface of what they see to discover the meanings behind the visuals. S.I. Hayakawa (1964), referring to what made words human, pointed

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out that there are really two meanings for most words-- their extensional (concrete) meanings and their intensional (implied) meanings. The same could be said of visual representations, and helping students learn about the power such representations have over the way they feel and think and respond to their world will predictably become an ever-greater part of classroom responsibility.

A recent monograph by E. Cornish (1996) of *The Futurist* magazine, for example, predicts that by 2025 people's attention may become this world's most precious resource. The competition for such a valuable commodity is likely to be fierce, although not necessarily fair. Ruskin could have walked down his London street and encountered a few hand-crafted or crudely printed signs begging for his attention. What does today's visual consumer find? What will confront the citizen of 2025?

Recognizing Frames of Reference

One important way that educators can prepare students to be wise visual consumers is to help them define their own frames of reference. A simple activity, and one that really could have meaning for any age student, is to do what we call "Old Dad" (honoring Dr. Kissick's father who used to entertain his daughters with it). The participants first look straight ahead and describe what they see directly in front of them. Then they are invited to change position, to bend, to stretch, to move. With each shift of position comes a new view of their world. Even the youngest student soon learns that there is a tangible link between the angle they look at something and what they are able to see.

Of course, becoming visually literate goes beyond changing just our physical perspective. The real lesson of "Old Dad" is that flexibility increases visibility, and that takes on a symbolic significance, too. Consider what happens when we ask students to move beyond themselves, to view the world from someone else's perspective. Late twentieth-century students find themselves in a time when technology has challenged them to confront a great deal of cultural diversity. How do educators prepare them to deal with situations when they confront a person whose age, physical ability, ethnicity, skills, national origin, or economic status is different from their own? The flexibility:visibility connection will be important here, too, won't it? One way to do this would be to ask students to examine stereotypes and to contrast those stereotypes with reality. Students could be asked to locate, imagine, or construct something that reminds them of a person whose background or ability is different from their own -- in other words, to define that person using a single symbol. A person from The Netherlands might be symbolized by a wooden shoe, one from the North Pole by an igloo. How would education or personal contact with a real person from either of those places refine the students' attitude? How much trust would they place in the accuracy of their original symbol? Would one symbol be enough? How does the flexibility of their experience improve their visibility?

Comparing Symbolic Interpretations

Students who understand that no one symbol can be counted on to represent an entire group of people will be ready, perhaps, to examine how the meanings of common symbols change based upon individual perspective. Jonathan Swift said that "vision is the art of seeing things invisible" (cited in Stevenson, 1984, p. 2095). Symbols encourage us to do this. Each of us can look at a common symbol (a red heart shape, a cornucopia, a swastika) and feel an immediate, often emotional reaction. The trick comes in recognizing that each reaction is formed out of our own experiences and that each, therefore, is individual. Educators can help students learn that they will all probably feel something as they look for the invisible meaning behind the visible symbol, but that each one of them will feel something slightly or significantly different from what others around him/her are feeling. Depending on the experience or sophistication of the students, teachers can construct activities to help them discover if all of them are "seeing" the same thing. Kindergartners,

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for instance, often visit pumpkin patches in the fall. Couldn't teachers help them to learn about diversity by asking each to tell what the pumpkin meant to her/him? Many U.S. children will immediately think of Jack O'Lanterns or Thanksgiving pies. Children from other countries, whose experiences would be different, probably would not.

Older students could use a similar exercise to discover what their country's flag symbolized to them, personally. This would be an excellent opportunity to use visual literacy skills in a wide range of courses. Sociology students could contrast the change in attitudes among persons in different age groups. History students could discuss how the design of the flag had evolved over time or how respect for it had shifted during various times in the country's history. Communications students could define its personal or universal symbolism in essays or speeches. Art students could be asked to redesign it to represent the perspective of a particular individual or ethnic group. Psychology students could examine man's fascination with and reliance on symbols. Journalism students could experiment with the relative impact of different layouts using the symbol. Business or economics students could discuss its value as a marketing tool. However teachers choose to use this activity, though, it will be important that they build in ways for the participants to share their results with each other, since this will reinforce the connection between perspective and attitude.

Constructing Personal Symbols

Another way for students to discover how powerful visual symbols are is to begin to construct some for themselves. An activity which is fully adaptable to age or subject is one we call "The Cup." For this one students are given a pencil, a sheet of paper, and a plain Styrofoam cup. They are instructed to trace a circle onto the paper using the large (open) end of the cup as a template. Inside that circle they are to draw something that symbolizes themselves. A person who believes s/he is basically cheerful, then, might turn the circle into a smiley face. A banker might do some variation of a dollar sign. An athlete might draw a baseball. It will be important (especially with adults) to emphasize that the quality of the drawing is not as important as the depth of thought that goes into creating it. Indeed, some of the drawings will be crude, some elaborate, but all ought to be well thought-out. Once again, the power of the activity comes as participants begin to share their drawings and to explain why they chose to depict themselves as they did--as they begin to reveal the invisible selves behind the visible ones.

Considering Another Angle

However students deal with symbols, whether as consumers or constructors, the real task for educators will be to help them see that they can gain perspective by changing their angle. This angle may simply be a physical one as in the Old Dad activity, but more often it will mean that they will need to rearrange themselves emotionally, socially, or psychologically in order to experience this shift in perspective. This latter challenge is sometimes frightening, especially if students feel that they will have to give up their own identity or assimilate a new one. A final challenge for educators, then, will be one of helping students learn to recognize what they have to gain by learning to discover meanings behind visuals from more perspectives than their own. They do not have to give up their own traditions or beliefs to do this. Instead they can live richer lives by learning about how others interpret the world's symbols. By learning to use their minds and their hearts as well as their eyes they can equip themselves to be better visual consumers, better citizens of the world, better friends.

Conclusion

Early in this century Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a poem which began "All I could see from where I stood...." Literary critics generally agree that the poem depicts spiritual or religious growth. Indeed, its title, "Renasence," means rebirth. As we stand on the threshold of a new century, one which is

likely to ask its citizens to be better visual consumers than they have ever been before, perhaps we can turn to this poem for guidance once again. Is there in the poem a pattern for personal growth? Does it offer a hint about how to expand our viewpoints and thus expand our world and our understanding of it? "The world," Millay reminds us, "stands out on either side/No wider than the heart is wide" (cited in Warfel, Gabriel, & Williams, 1937, p. 1362). Becoming visually literate implies more than just recognizing the existence of shape or color or form. It means more than just assigning or constructing symbols. For tomorrow's citizens to be good consumers of visual elements, for them to be able to deal with the bombardment of symbols that will compete for their attention, they must somewhere learn to view the world with their hearts, too. Helping students look for and recognize the humanity behind the visual gives them another perspective, another angle. It enriches their educational experience. It helps them deal with change and diversity. And, it prepares them to enter a hectic world better prepared to make sense of it all.

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